

Ladybirds for Lunch

by Hanif Kureishi

It was a special occasion, a party day.

The identical twins Theo and Jake knew it was, because immediately after breakfast their mother scrubbed the remains of all baked beans, bits of egg, and pieces of toast from their hair. Then, as she hurriedly fitted them into their matching Chinese silk jackets, the boys noticed another strange sight. Their father was helping in the kitchen. It was most unusual for him to wander that far from the television, particularly in the morning.

The two boys looked out of the window and saw what a lovely day it was going to be for a lunch party in the garden. Rather unusually the sun was shining and the few flowers the boys hadn't flattened with their football seemed to be glowing in the misty morning air.

This wasn't just any old lunch, said father, crouching down and adopting his 'listen-to-me-seriously' voice. Unfortunately though, since he had decided to let his sideburns grow and now looked as though two hairy slugs had settled on the side of his face, Theo and Jake found it difficult to not to giggle when he was talking, and had to keep pinching one another.

All the same, they were informed by their father's pointing finger that the guests, Frazer and Sabina Binswanger were very important people who helped decide on the programmes which appeared on television. And since Mother hadn't had a job for over a year, she was very keen to have Mr Binswanger employ her.

Father added that the Binswangers had a villa in France with a swimming pool and servants, where the most glamorous and exciting people went to escape London and meet everyone they knew. Mother and father desperately wanted to be invited to this fashionable gathering. Except there was one problem. The Binswangers only liked children some of the time, and not all of the time. If the family were to receive an invitation the boys had to be on their best behaviour today, and must allow themselves to be kissed, tickled, tousled and tossed in the air, when required, by the Binswangers.

"Best behaviour," promised Theo.

"We are the good boys!" said Jake.

They slapped hands with their father and each other, and skipped out into the garden.

Excitement mounted all morning. Father frantically searched the house for an item of clothing unstained by crushed biscuit. Mother hunted for her curlers. This involved her glaring at the probable culprits Jake and Theo: she had to 'enter the mind of the criminal' before foraging in the obvious places. One curler was in the fridge, embedded in the butter, another was installed the front of the video recorder, and the last one had been neatly placed in the watering can.

Then, with her curlers in - and her head looked like a bowl of pasta - mother went into the garden with a trowel to shovel up the numerous piles of cat poo. Cats came from miles around, she claimed, to crap exclusively on her earth. Glancing furtively around to ensure that no one from the Neighbourhood Watch was looking - she was a leading

member - mother hurled the cat droppings over the fence into the next garden and scurried back into the house.

The cats were practically the only wildlife there was in Shepherd's Bush, apart from the people on the street, and of course the beautiful ladybirds, hundreds of which congregated around the garden bench to compare spots and talk about what was happening.

While mother and father rushed in and out of the house carrying bread and wine, cutlery and napkins, and laying them on a trestle table covered with a white tablecloth, Jake and Theo, playing in a corner of the garden, had gone very quiet. On a normal day such a silence would have aroused suspicion. But today their parents were too busy to notice.

Theo had gathered a group of ladybirds in his hand and was intending to place them, for the afternoon, in a cardboard box, so the insects could party together. Jake was hunting for others in order to give them to Theo. Once the ladybirds were gathered in the concert hall of the box, the boys - who loved to play mad jigs on their numerous instruments - would make music and watch them dance.

Before the boys had located a box, they were disturbed by voices.

Frazer and Sabina Binswanger, the important guests with important names, were entering the garden like Royalty at a film premier. Sabina's jewellery jingle-jangled and her high heels punctured father's new lawn, while Frazer's confident voice boomed across the neighbourhood. They both wore sharp perfume which caused all flies in the vicinity to immediately become unconscious. However, the ladybirds - snug in the warm booth of Jake and Theo's hands - were not affected.

The boys tried to disappear under a hedge but mother was calling for them to greet the Binswangers. Theo quickly looked around for somewhere to lodge his insect friends until after lunch. But there was nowhere - until he spied a crusty pie with a hole in the top, sitting conveniently on the table. He thrust the ladybirds into the pie.

"Good idea," said Jake, doing the same thing.

Theo hastily covered over the gap with a loose piece of pastry, and they pushed each other towards the out-stretched arms of the guests.

They all sat down to lunch.

The cutlery clinked, wine was poured and the voices rose. Theo and Jake, who had Sabina's lipstick kisses imprinted on their cheeks and forehead like pink butterflies, smiled up politely at the Binswangers as instructed. Occasionally either Frazer or Sabina would grab the end of one or other boy's nose, as if they were public property, and give them a sudden hard twist. This was their way of being friendly, which the boys knew they had to bear if they were to be invited to France on holiday.

Meanwhile the boys were kicking one another under the table. They knew they had to do something about the ladybirds, who were suffocating inside the pie. Theo whispered to Jake that they had to try and release them.

But as Theo leant over to grab the pie, his mother tapped him on the wrist: "Wait a minute," she scolded. "Guests first!"

"But mum-"

How could he explain?

"Mum!" echoed Jake, as she cut into it.

It was too late. A moment later a piece of the pie was on Frazer Binswanger's plate.

"Yum, yum," he said, licking his lips. "I'm very hungry." He looked at mother. "Everyone says your food is wonderful."

"Thank you," she said, with a happy smile, thinking of her new job.

Soon the pie would be in Mr Binswanger's mouth. Theo and Jake could only look on in dismay.

Now Frazer Binswanger was a man of such sophistication and importance that he was allowed to have bad manners. Theo and Jake watched as he picked up the pie with both hands, put it to his mouth and took such a large bite they thought he might swallow the whole world.

"This is delicious," he said, spitting out bits of pastry, one of which struck Jake above the eye.

Jake removed the pastry from his eyebrow and looked at Theo. They knew ladybirds were rather crunchy but soft inside, like tiny prawns. With sauce they might be tasty: but it was not a good idea to eat them alive, particularly if you were unprepared for the experience.

"Delicious!" said Frazer Binswanger.

As Mr Binswanger's teeth champed into the crust again, the ladybirds hurried out of the pie, rushing away like dodgem cars propelled by silent electricity. Some of them flew into the air, but many others, drawn by the heat of Mr Binswanger's face, merely crawled over his soft, sticky cheeks and settled down in a swoon, having swallowed the alcohol he was sweating. Others ran about in a panic, not knowing where they were.

Jake and Theo saw their father notice this first. His eyes widened and he glanced fearfully at mother. Looking at Frazer Binswanger's face she almost fell backwards off her chair in horror. She would never work again!

Then Sabina Binswanger, with her fork at her mouth, glanced up to see a whole company of ladybirds moving across her husband's face.

Mr Binswanger so loved to talk that he failed to realise the pink surface of his face was spotted with moving dots. In fact several were already swinging from the dark hairs that stuck out of the top of his nose like wires (it was said they could pick up foreign TV and radio stations, like aerials). Everyone watched in fascination as one of these ladybirds then trotted up his nostril like an explorer in the rain forest. Other ladybirds lined up to run into the mysterious and winding caverns of his ears, clambering over bits of old potato and carrot lodged there, until a battalion of them entered the spacious living room of his mind.

Jake looked at Sabina Binswanger in amazement. She had stuffed her napkin into her mouth. Theo wondered if she was so hungry that she wanted to eat it. But he realised she was trying to stop herself laughing.

When Mr Binswanger saw the astonished faces of his friends around the table and felt what was happening to him, his red face turned the colour of a peeled potato. Soon he was aware that the living room of his mind was alive with ladybirds. He threw down his knife and fork, pushed away his plate and began to knock himself on the side of the head with his fist. He began to wave around in his chair like a tree in a strong wind.

"Something not nice has happened to me!" he moaned in disbelief. "I've been invaded by aliens!"

It was true. Theo and Jake knew ladybirds loved parties and that by now they would be making themselves comfortable inside Mr Binswanger's mind. Soon they might be

swinging from the light fittings, playing records and videos, smoking cigarettes and even dancing.

But it was also obvious to the twins that banging yourself above the ear was no way to extract insects from inside your head. The thudding noise would only frighten the ladybirds and they would scuttle deeper and deeper into the interior, perhaps into the memory area, so that every dream of the past that Bingswanger now had, would be sprinkled with ladybirds, like pepper on an omelette.

What could the boys do? It was an emergency.

Usually their mother rid the garden of ants by pouring boiling water over them. But the twins knew their chances of going on holiday to France wouldn't improve if they shot hot water up Frazer Binswanger's nose or into his ears.

Without saying anything, the same thought occurred to the boys simultaneously.

Theo threw back his chair and dashed into the house to fetch his tambourine and a pan and spoon. Jake jumped up and raced indoors for his battery-operated keyboard. They sprinted out into the garden and began to play a cool bossa nova. They had rehearsed this song many times. It was one of their favourites. But still Jake and Theo were nervous. Mother and father were glaring at them with very serious 'I'll-get-you-for-this-later' looks on their faces.

Theo and Jake knew that all insects, like all children, could be moved by music. The boys' sweet voices rose like doves into the air, and across West London the ears of shoppers pricked up. People dropped their bags to feel the delicious rhythm working through them.

As the music swung, even Sabina Binswanger's foot bounced and she clapped her hands. But Mr Binswanger, who had gone rigid with distress and annoyance, remained perfectly still as the ladybirds frolicked on the levers and wheels of his mind.

After a few moments everyone saw, pushing through the opening of one of his hairy nostrils, the black and white head of a ladybird. But they could also see that Mr Binswanger, with a cruel and vengeful expression on his face, was about to crush it into jam between his thumb and finger.

Jake shook his head wildly and Theo banged furiously on the pan. Squashing a ladybird wouldn't encourage the others to come out. Surely Frazer Binswanger understood that? Adults could be very stupid at times.

Fortunately, heeding Jake and Theo's warning, Mr Binswanger refrained from his murderous action. And as the rhythm of the music built, the ladybirds began to emerge from his ears and nose into the sunshine, shaking their bottoms and waving their legs. Some of them looked a little dazed, as anyone would, had they spent time within the foggy labyrinth of Mr Binswanger's brain. But most were dancing, and many gathered on Mr Binswanger's forehead, where they hopped and capered like a line of animated billiard balls.

Soon they were all out and Mr Binswanger's face returned to its natural Ribena colour. Once more Sabrina was laughing and drinking. Mother and father were so relieved they even smiled at one another. The boys, settled under the table, played a calm Moroccan tune that they were perfecting.

"Those boys can certainly play," said Sabrina, clicking her fingers and resisting her desire to twist their noses.

"But they are often quiet too," father explained firmly. "Sometimes for hours...and

hours...and hours on end."

"Yes!" confirmed mother.

"Not too quiet, I hope," said Sabrina. "For they'll certainly entertain the other guests on holiday in France - if they bring their instruments!"

"But we're always telling them to shut up," said mother.

"I wouldn't do that," said Sabrina. "Those boys have talent!"

"Talent!" murmured Frazer. He lit a big cigar and relaxed after his disturbing experience. Talent was his favourite word. He loved to say it, but most of all he loved to find it, particularly in his own neighbourhood, and during lunch. "I'm going to put those boys on a television show. They really helped me out. Those ladybirds were tickling my brain so much I thought I'd go insane!"

"I wonder, though," murmured Sabina, "How they got in that pie in the first place?"

"I don't know," said father, looking uneasily at the innocent faces of his identical sons, "But people say that ladybirds always follow the talent!"

"Like me," said Frazer Binswanger, sipping his drink, and patting the boys on the head. "Jake and Theo - play on please!"

And they picked up their instruments and sang.